

LONDON TIMES  
29 May 1980

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# Radical changes needed to save Soviet Union from growing threat of economic catastrophe

In the fifth of this series of articles based on exclusive interviews with The Times, Ilya Dzhirkvelov, a former KGB officer and Tass correspondent, describes the new aristocracy of Soviet Russia formed by a corrupt bureaucracy.

Russia is run by an isolated, self-perpetuating "aristocracy" cushioned from reality and unaware of the catastrophe facing the Soviet economy. And whoever succeeds Mr. Brezhnev as leader will have to take radical measures to stave off the collapse of Soviet society.

Those are the conclusions of Ilya Dzhirkvelov, who has spent nearly 40 years as a member of Russia's ruling elite, first as a KGB officer, then as a Tass correspondent abroad. Before his defection Mr. Dzhirkvelov was a Soviet official with the World Health Organization in Geneva, a highly-prized privilege entrusted only to loyal Communists.

Throughout this long career Mr. Dzhirkvelov has closely observed the ways of the Soviet establishment. It is, he says, a moribund body of unprincipled careerists and nothing short of real change can save it. The bureaucratic disease was inherent in the Soviet system from the start. But under Mr. Brezhnev it has reached epidemic proportions. There is, according to Mr. Dzhirkvelov, an unwieldy "new aristocracy" or "aristocracy" consisting of Party and Government organs at all levels, the KGB, the Army, local administration, officers and officials of all kinds, who between them control and suffocate all aspects of Soviet citizens' lives.

The idea that the boycott of the Olympic Games has introduced "politics" into sport, Mr. Dzhirkvelov points out, is mistaken. In the Soviet Union nothing is untouched by the tentacles of government, and everything, from sport to literature, is already suffused with and controlled by political considerations.

Mr. Dzhirkvelov acknowledges that he has himself benefited from the system. As a Soviet official abroad with KGB connexions he had two cars, a well-appointed flat in Moscow as well as in his overseas posting; frequent travel to and from the West; and access to special shops selling consumer goods and foodstuffs unknown to, indeed undreamed of, by ordinary Russians. Corruption at the top in Russia today, he says, surpasses anything known in Tsarist times. "Nicholas II was a poor man compared to Mr. Brezhnev."

But like most corrupt elites, the Soviet establishment presides over a structure which is rotten at the centre. The Soviet system, Mr. Dzhirkvelov told The Times, is in no way socialist in the true, or original sense. It crushes every spark of human individuality, and depends for its survival on the suppression of free thought and creativity. For most of his career Mr. Dzhirkvelov helped to bolster up this repressive regime. But he became increasingly critical of a system which was maintained only through fear and coercion. Mr. Dzhirkvelov was disturbed by what he regards as the ill-considered, even reckless, policies pursued by the Kremlin.

The invasion of Afghanistan was in his view, an act which flew in the face not only of world opinion but also of plain common sense. This was the last straw in Mr. Dzhirkvelov's growing disillusionment. When officials in the Soviet Embassy in Geneva tried to frame him by making a minor traffic violation into a more serious offence involving drunken driving, Mr. Dzhirkvelov realized the authorities must be preparing a case against him. He returned to Moscow, still hoping that friends in high places would intervene on his behalf. But most shunned Mr. Dzhirkvelov as a doomed man with whom it was wise not to associate. Seeing this as final proof that the system which had nurtured him was about to turn on him, with

all the ruthlessness at its command, Mr. Dzhirkvelov decided to defect to the West.

In one sense, Mr. Dzhirkvelov agrees, the Soviet system is strong, in that it is able to crush individuals and leaves those who—like himself—wish to break away from it no alternative but to seek refuge in the opposing camp. But the essential weakness of the system, he argues, is illustrated by its very inability to tolerate dissent or "betrayal". Any system, he suggests, which is so afraid of ideas and external influences necessarily lacks inner strength.

## Candidate for supreme power

The regime's response to the influence of the BBC and the Voice of America illustrates this: "We used to say: if our system is as good as our leaders say it is, what are they so afraid of? If what Western radio stations say is false, surely we can judge that for ourselves." Why, Mr. Dzhirkvelov and his colleagues wondered, was there so much talk of the penetration of Russia by Western ideas, and so little about the reverse? The treatment of Soviet dissidents, he argues, is in itself a sign of insecurity. He is not himself sympathetic to the dissidents, but considers the exiling of Dr. Andrei Sakharov—a member of the Academy, a great Russian scientist—to be scandalous. The ruling elite, he believes, is kept in power by the Army and the KGB, and "anything could happen" if they were to falter "for a single day".

From this point of view, the question of who succeeds Mr. Brezhnev either as Party leader or as President (he holds both posts) could be important insofar as any new man at the top tries to tackle the Soviet malaise. The succession problem itself is, in Mr. Dzhirkvelov's view, "impenetrable". The "favourite candidate" of the Western press, Mr. Brezhnev's

protege Konstantin Chernenko, Mr. Dzhirkvelov regards as an unlikely contender. His own money is on Andrei Kirilenko, who although older than Mr. Brezhnev is "stronger physically". But few predicted the rise of Mr. Khrushchev after the death of Stalin, and the post-Brezhnev era could throw up some equally unforeseen candidate for supreme power. Whoever it turns out to be, he will, in Mr. Dzhirkvelov's view, have to restore some

credibility to the highest offices in the land. Mr. Brezhnev, he says, has made a "laughing stock" out of the leadership by decorating himself with ever more grandiose medals and awards. These include the Lenin Prize for Literature, awarded for Mr. Brezhnev's memoirs, which are now required reading in Soviet schools, and which Mr. Dzhirkvelov dismisses as "devoid not only of profound ideas but also of literary merit of any kind".

But above all, the new man will have to take steps to halt what Mr. Dzhirkvelov sees as the "economic and moral decay" of the Soviet system itself. Economically the country faces "catastrophe" except for the privileged few there is no meat to be found in the shops, and very few other basic foodstuffs either. An economy of permanent rather than temporary scarcity has created "a huge number of possibilities for making money by dishonest means" and this has in turn led to large-scale corruption at all levels of Soviet life. Chronic shortages of food and housing have also led to poor health, since the unceasing search for the necessities of life, coupled with the daily routine of office or factory means that people return home in the evening "completely drained both physically and morally". There was much concern about this, Mr. Dzhirkvelov discloses, among Soviet officials at WHO in Geneva. Their worries—not shared with Western colleagues—included the spread of alcoholism in Russia, which they see as due to the pressures of Sov-

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retite, coupled with the ready availability of cheap vodka. When Mr B. V. Petrovsky, the Soviet Minister of Health, visited Geneva, he even admitted to a closed session of Soviet officials at WHO that if alcoholism continued to spread at its present rate in Russia, it would eventually lead to "the degeneration of the nation."

Whereas in the past, says Mr Dzhirkvelov, ordinary Russians complained privately about economic decay and political repression, nowadays more and more members of the ruling elite itself are voicing their concern. These, he says, include officers of both the Army and the KGB, which after all are composed of people, many of whom understand what is going on only too well. Only the pinnacle of power is totally isolated from reality.

"It is not surprising if Mr Brezhnev and his colleagues believe in the abundance of Communist society, since they live in it even if nobody else does. So will some new leadership take the radical, rational measures," Mr Dzhirkvelov believes necessary, including a degree of democratization? Mr Dzhirkvelov himself is not optimistic. If the Kremlin tightens up still further, he says, something could well crack; but if it allows liberalization, that too would lead to an "unpredictable explosion". Many Russians, he says, are fearfully asking themselves what will happen next. "The one certainty," Mr Dzhirkvelov concludes, "is that something must happen. We cannot go on as we are for much longer."

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